



SESAME STREET RUNS ALONG THE NILE

Michelle Ward-Brent

- > **Improving Children's Readiness to Learn**
- > **Promoting Girls' Education**
- > *Alam Simsim*
- > **Unprecedented Reach**
- > **Early Childhood Development**
- > **Outreach**

Development experts note that investments in education of females have the highest return of all educational investments. However, in most parts of the developing world, significant disparities continue to exist in the educational standing of girls and boys. This is particularly true in rural Upper Egypt. Eliminating such gender disparities is the focus of United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Cairo's Education and Training program, which supports a number of educational programs to improve the access, quality, and efficiency of basic education. Among these is a highly successful local co-production of *Sesame Street*, called *Alam Simsim*, which is watched by more than 4 million Egyptian children and their families every day.

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S READINESS TO LEARN

Why *Sesame Street* in Egypt? *Sesame Street* has long been associated with documented improvements in children's literacy and numeracy skills and with helping to prepare young children for school. Research conducted in association with the project found that some children in rural communities of Upper Egypt had acquired fewer literacy and numeracy skills than children in comparable countries and even children in more developed parts of Egypt. These skills are fundamental to early childhood development and successful participation in school. Nationwide, only 12% to 14% of Egyptian children have access to preschool education, and primary school dropout rates are high. Learners in the poorest communities, on average, have only three years of education.

However, nearly all Egyptian households have access to television and electronic media, which has a 96% penetration rate. By improving children's readiness to learn, and by increasing the skills and knowledge levels of their parents, *Alam Simsim* has been designed to address some of the underlying factors that contribute to Upper Egypt's low primary school enrollment, high primary school dropout and failure rates, and low literacy levels among adult women.

PROMOTING GIRLS' EDUCATION

Egypt needs to increase literacy skills and girls' participation in school to advance development and improve equity. USAID/Cairo has responded to this need by placing a high priority on programs to reduce gender disparities in

education, expand access, and improve the quality and efficiency of formal and nonformal education. The goal is to ensure that Egyptian learners will enter the 21st century with the skills and problem-solving abilities required for a modern economy. The program places particular emphasis on increasing girls' enrollment, retention, and achievement rates in primary school in communities in three poor governorates in Upper Egypt (Minya, Beni Suef, and Fayoum).

Egypt's female adult literacy rate, although growing at 1% per year, is only 41%. This is low even by the standards of poor countries. In 1999, the *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) ranked Egypt 120 out of 174 countries on its human development index, and attributed the low ranking primarily to Egypt's low literacy rate. The report also noted that Egypt's ranking fell nine places from the previous year. Low literacy, the lack of universal enrollment, and the poor quality of basic education in Egypt are seriously constraining the country's social and economic development and adversely affecting the health and well-being of millions of people.

Despite these challenges, considerable progress is being made in increasing girls' participation in school, especially in the targeted areas of Upper Egypt. The 2000 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey reported that girls' primary school enrollment in Upper Egypt rose from 54.5% in 1995 to 74.0% in 2000. USAID's programs have contributed to this improvement.

Working in collaboration with the Government of Egypt and other local and international partners, USAID/Cairo funds programs that support school construction, teacher training, English-language instruction for teachers, literacy and job skills development, community advocacy, girls' scholarships, nonformal life-skills training, and preschool education. These programs have improved the quality of teaching and increased community and parent involvement in school management, which, in turn, has contributed to higher retention and achievement rates. Many of these programs are implemented through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with local communities. Many of the constraints to girls' educational achievement in poor areas are beyond the capacity of government to solve; they must be addressed at the local level. USAID's programs have recognized this, promoting new relationships among government, NGOs, communities, and families. *Alam Simsim* is one such model of successful collaboration that involves the government, business, NGOs, and local communities.

Michelle Ward-Brent is Girls' Education Adviser to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Cairo Office. This chapter first appeared as an article in *TechKnowLogia*, September/October 2001 (www.TechKnowLogia.org), and is used by permission. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of USAID or Sesame Workshop.

ALAM SIMSIM

Despite a rich history in film production, Egypt had few educational media resources for children and none that approached the magnitude, innovation, and educational efficacy of *Alam Simsim*. The series models positive images for girls and boys, promotes girls' education and good health and environmental practices, and celebrates Egypt's rich culture and traditions. It has been designed to encourage girls' early and continued educational participation. One of *Alam Simsim*'s leading characters, Khokha, is a "four-year-old" female Muppet with a passion for learning. Curious and creative, she loves to ask questions and find solutions. The portrayal of girls as active, equal participants in all elements of the series has been a pioneering advance in a culture that has traditionally promoted limiting gender stereotypes.

Two seasons of 65 half-hour programs each have been produced, and the program is broadcast twice a day, five days per week. The first season premiered in August 2000 to domestic and international acclaim. The second season launched with a special "back-to-school" event that was hosted by First Lady Suzanne Mubarak. The third season is underway.

Over the past three years, Sesame Workshop (the United States-based producers of *Sesame Street*) has provided technical assistance and training to the local production company, Alkarma Productions. The training focused on scriptwriting, puppeteering, directing, production, editing, and research. Throughout the development and production phases, leading Egyptian educators, linguists, health specialists, and others worked in close cooperation with program writers and directors to ensure that the program's curriculum is educationally effective, culturally sensitive, and reflective of Egyptian priorities.

Alam Simsim's lessons are illustrated through humor, music, fantasy, and daily life situations. Short story segments on the "Street" are combined with animation and minidocumentaries to create an engaging program format that can be enjoyed by the whole family. Among those calling *Alam Simsim* home are friends and neighborhood Muppets Khokha, Filfil, and Nimnim (created by The Jim Henson Company). Khokha, as noted above, is a four-year-old girl. Filfil is an ageless Muppet who has all the answers, even though he may not know what the questions are. Enthusiastic and easygoing, Filfil genuinely wants to help his friends in need, and Nimnim is a young Muppet who is wise for his age. Gentle and patient, he finds his surroundings fresh and amazing, especially when it comes to nature. Surprise celebrity guests also

appear in the series, along with a regular adult and child human cast.

UNPRECEDENTED REACH

After only eight months on the air, *Alam Simsim* has become a highly popular family series, reaching the majority of children throughout the country. A November 2001 omnibus household survey conducted by the Middle East Media Research Bureau reported that the series is now watched by more than 90% of children under age eight (more than 4 million children) in urban areas and 86% of children in rural areas. Such extensive reach is unprecedented in Egypt, or anywhere else in the world. Surveys have also reported that 54% of mothers regularly view the series. The proportion of low-income families who view the series increased significantly.

The success of the series validates USAID/Cairo's belief that distance education for preschoolers can make an enormous contribution in a country where less than one-eighth of children receive formal preschool education, but where TV penetration is nearly universal. The series is strongly supported by First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, who recently called it an example of "intelligent children's programming that can instill certain ideas and values that are indispensable in today's world."

Over the 30 years since *Sesame Street* was first broadcast, extensive research has been conducted on the series' effectiveness in improving literacy and numeracy skills, especially among the disadvantaged. To date, 20 international co-productions have been built on the *Sesame Street* model, each one a unique series that reflects local culture and tradition and a curriculum that emphasizes local priorities. These productions tap the tremendous power of media to bring the four corners of the world into homes that lack exposure and education. Simple and entertaining lessons on literacy, numeracy, health, education, and the environment have the power to change attitudes and practices and to build basic skills and knowledge among children and their parents. In Turkey, research indicated that the country's *Sesame Street*-based series produced learning gains equal to an entire year of schooling. *The Economist* recently lauded the South African co-production of *Sesame Street*, which focuses on issues specific to a post-apartheid South Africa, for its innovative use of radio, television, and outreach.

Research in Egypt is documenting both the problems that the series addresses and the progress being made. The *Alam Simsim* team's research in Beni Suef and Minya found that boys aged four to six years old can count

significantly higher than girls and are more skilled in letter recognition. But children who had watched the series (in comparison to those who had not), showed tendencies toward a change in views on gender (such as whether women can become pilots) and an increase in knowledge of hygienic practices (washing hands, brushing teeth, getting enough sleep, etc.). Research also documented that gender bias begins to form at an early age.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Why invest in early childhood development? The high returns on such investment have been documented throughout the world. Research has shown that the first five years of a child's life are critical to cognitive, physical, and emotional development, and that half of a person's intelligence potential is developed by age four. The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development notes that early childhood interventions can have a lasting effect on intellectual capacity, personality, and social behavior. Such programs have been shown to increase school enrollment rates, improve the learners' performance in school, reduce the costs of education, and positively affect a range of related long-term social and economic indicators.

The 1994 Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children reported on scientific research, specifically noting the following findings: 1) brain development before age one is more rapid and extensive than was realized, and, although cell formation is virtually complete before birth, brain maturation continues after birth; 2) brain development is much more vulnerable to environmental influence than was understood; 3) inadequate nutrition before birth and in the first years of life can seriously interfere with brain development and lead to such neurological and behavioral disorders as learning disabilities and mental retardation; 4) the influence of early environment on brain development is long lasting: infants exposed to good nutrition, toys, and playmates have better brain function at age 12 than those raised in a less stimulating environment; and 5) environment affects not only the number of brain cells and connections among them but also the way these connections are "wired."

OUTREACH

Educational outreach efforts to support the series' educational messages, extend their impact, and sustain the program are now being developed. A series of public service announcements (PSAs) incorporating the series' characters has been developed to promote family literacy and girls' education. A series of PSAs on health and safety is in production (for example, promoting Egypt's new seatbelt law), and a complementary parent education program for rural families is now under development. The latter program will provide outreach and training support to illiterate or semi-literate parents to improve their ability to prepare their children for school; increase their awareness of the importance of all children attending school and becoming literate and numerate; improve their understanding of developmental phases and their role as their children's first teacher; promote good health practices; and educate them on how to stimulate a child's cognitive development.

USAID/Cairo has provided funding for three seasons of *Alam Simsim* through a grant to Sesame Workshop. The program was developed in collaboration with the Egyptian Ministry of Education and has been supported by the Ministry of Information. As noted, First Lady Suzanne Mubarak is a patron of the series. In addition, Americana, the leading food company in the Middle East, is an official sponsor.

Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit educational organization committed to maximizing the power of media as an educational force in the lives of children. Its properties include television, Internet, CD-ROMs, magazines, books, film, community outreach, and product licensing. Its *Sesame Street* programming and 20 indigenous co-productions have been enjoyed in 140 countries. The Workshop can be accessed online at www.ctw.org or www.sesamestreet.com.